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Final Edition

**Obama's $100,000 garden grant wasted; He vowed to 'work tirelessly' to build an oasis for Englewood. It never happened**.

By Chris Fusco and Dave McKinney

Staff reporters

As a state senator, Barack Obama gave $100,000 in state money to a campaign volunteer who failed to deliver on a plan to create a botanic garden in one of Chicago's most blighted neighborhoods.

Obama -- who was running for Congress when he announced the project in 2000 -- said the green space in Englewood would build ''a sense of neighborhood pride."

Instead, what was supposed to be a six-block stretch of trees and paths is now a field of unfulfilled dreams, strewn with weeds, garbage and broken pavement.

Kenny B. Smith, whose nonprofit group got the money, said it was spent legitimately, mostly on underground site preparation. But he admitted Thursday that the garden is a lost cause because other government money never came through.

"We gave up," said Smith, who heads the Chicago Better Housing Association. "It was a losing battle."

Smith -- an early Obama supporter who gave $550 to his state and congressional campaigns -- said he gave his paperwork documenting the work to a state agency and no longer has it. A Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity spokeswoman said officials would look into the matter.

Smith blamed the site's current poor condition on construction material dumped there during the state's recent reconstruction of the Dan Ryan Expy.

But a reporter walked the site last week with a landscape architect from the Illinois Green Industry Association who found no evidence of the work Smith cited. The only major changes since 2000: A gazebo was added, and some trees were cut down.

Obama, the presumptive Democratic presidential nominee, said through a spokesman he wasn't responsible for monitoring the work; the staffs of Gov. Blagojevich and former Gov. George Ryan were.

"It is clear that Englewood residents have not been able to benefit from a completed community garden," Obama spokesman Ben LaBolt said. "Sen. Obama will . . . do everything he can to ensure that the Englewood community gets the resources it needs to provide its residents with a livable neighborhood."

On Jan. 14, 2000, Obama and Smith announced the Englewood Beautification Plan at Englewood High School. Obama promised to help raise $1.1 million. He was running then to unseat U.S. Rep. Bobby Rush, but lost in the Democratic primary.

The beautification project, planned near and under L tracks between 59th Place and 62nd Place, was outside Obama's state Senate district but within the congressional district.

"I will work tirelessly in Springfield and in Chicago to raise public and private dollars to fund this worthy endeavor," Obama said then.

In 2001, at Obama's direction, a $100,000 Illinois FIRST grant went to Smith's group. The garden site was part of Rosewood Estates, an affordable-housing development being built by the group, whose unpaid board chairman was Brian Washington, a Sun-Times security guard.

Plans called for more than 50 homes, but only a dozen were built, Smith said.

The remaining $1 million for the botanic garden was never raised.

Now, Smith said he's trying to get city leaders to let him use the land and other vacant lots to build about 30 new homes in Englewood.

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